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Reading communities: why, what and how?

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Reading communities: why, what and how?

In this article, **Professor Teresa Cremin** considers the long term aim of developing readers for life and challenges us to consider effective strategies and practices to genuinely achieve this.

“Reading for pleasure has myriad other benefits such as a wider vocabulary and general knowledge, an enriched imagination and more developed narrative writing.”

Are you seeking to build a vibrant community of readers in your classroom and/or school? If so, how will you know when you’ve achieved your goal? What are the key characteristics of such communities? Can these be seen, heard, felt, experienced? What strategies and practices will help you succeed? Is there a fail-safe route? A motorway between research and practice?

Whilst this article responds to these questions, first we surely need to consider our long term aims. Do we want to develop readers for life (the maximum entitlement), or will the ‘expected standard’ (the minimum) or ‘greater depth’ (a halfway house) suffice? After all, it’s only five years since reading for pleasure became a statutory requirement in England; it had never before been mandated and, as Philip Pullman observed about the 1998 National Literacy Strategy, whilst there were more than 55 verbs to describe reading, ‘enjoy’ was not one of them! Yet now developing a love of reading is recognised officially as essential and building

communities of engaged readers expected of us all.

The reason for the current attention lies at least in part in the influential PISA and PIRLS surveys and established international evidence that reading for pleasure—independent choice-led reading—is a strong predictor of reading attainment. In England in the last PIRLS, children who reported liking reading the most, scored, on average, 45-points more than those who reported that they do not like it (McGrane et al., 2017). This is similar to the international trend and is underscored by other research. For example, a study of British Cohort data revealed a strong association between childhood reading and increased attainment in literacy and numeracy in adolescence (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). In addition, as teachers know intuitively, and other studies have shown, reading for pleasure has myriad other benefits such as a wider vocabulary and general knowledge, an enriched imagination and more developed narrative writing (Senechal et al., 2018).

There is no question that the will to read influences the skill and vice versa. Hardly surprising, but it seems to have been enough, alongside concerted campaigning by literacy organisations, to influence policy and now practice.

School reading communities: avoiding empty demonstrations

Since reading for pleasure was included in the NC in 2013, its profile has risen exponentially. Many schools are seeking ways to demonstrate their commitment to this agenda and are seeking to showcase their schools as reading communities. Many have refurbished or reclaimed their libraries, and some have even purchased double-decker buses, tents, sheds, tree houses and caravans to deck out, as well as cushions, carpets and sofas to enrich classroom reading areas. These often-colourful spaces overtly indicate to parents, governors, Ofsted inspectors and the children that the school values reading. But is this institutional demonstration of community enough?

In other ways too, with the best of intentions, schools can be sucked into performing reading for pleasure. Institution-wide events and competitions exist aplenty; the former can be superb evocations of emerging communities with pop-up cafés and picnics enticing parents and children to read together, but they can also be manifestations of one-way traffic with schools telling parents what they need to do to support their child's reading, not two-way dialogues about home and school practices and preferences. In-class or school competitions with awards for the number of books read, reviews written and parent signatures in reading records, for instance, have recently become popular. The resultant prizes (a Friday film and popcorn, for example, for the class with the highest percentage of parents' signatures) are positioned as incentives, but such extrinsic motivators rarely work in the long term. They encourage children to read for recognition, for reward, for their parents, their teachers and/or the school, but not for themselves. Reading for pleasure is more closely associated with intrinsic motivation; it is reading that children do for themselves at their own pace, with whom they choose and in their own way.

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Reading communities informed by research

In the *Teachers as Readers* (TaRs) study, undertaken in 27 schools with 43 teachers in five areas of England, the research team focused on reading for pleasure across a year (Cremin et al., 2014). They developed and tracked teachers' knowledge and practice, the impact on children's identities as readers and later observed the creation of a reading for pleasure pedagogy, the development of Reading Teachers and in time, the emergence of communities of engaged readers (See Figure 1 opposite).

It became clear that when the teachers widened their knowledge and pleasure in reading children's literature and other texts, and became more aware of their own and the children's reading practices, they began to *reconceptualise reading from the inside out*, and more effectively built a

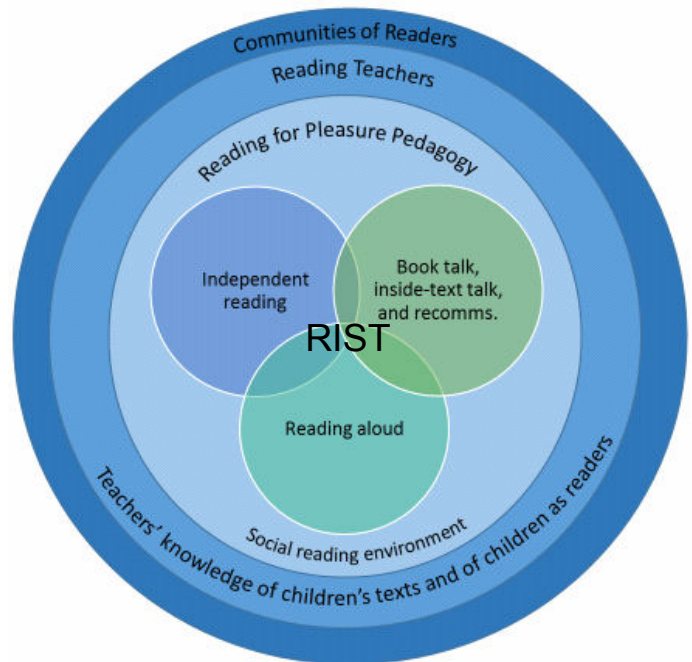


Figure 1: Research insights regarding the effective development of reading for pleasure (based on Cremin et al. 2014)

reading for pleasure pedagogy and strong communities of readers within school. These reading communities took time to build. They were relationship strong and highly interactive, and shifted reading in these teachers' classes from an individual private pursuit to a more collaborative social activity (Cremin et al., 2014).

Teachers' knowledge of texts and of their young readers

Teachers' knowledge of texts and of readers was key to this journey and the cornerstone on which interactive communities of readers were built. When practitioners enriched their repertoires of children's literature and began to get to know the interests and practices of the young readers, they were more able to skilfully book-match and tailor their recommendations to particular individuals. Many of the teachers also became more open and interested in receiving text suggestions from the young people, and gradually two-way reciprocal recommendations and 'books in common' between teachers and children developed. These prompted discussions and life connections and enabled new relationships to begin. Over time, teachers noticed children exchanging texts too and recognised the value of these emerging reader-to-reader-networks.

If you want to widen your repertoire of children's literature and other texts, then why not try one of the following challenges? You could seize the chance to do so publicly, sharing your journey with the children as you broaden your subject knowledge and invite staff to join you. You might choose to:

- Read Award Winners: Select from Carnegie and Kate Greenaway, Blue Peter, Costa, School Library Association, UKLA, Smarties and more besides!
- Read to your knee or thigh in books!
- Take the 52 books challenge and share each one as you read it.
- Read outside your comfort zone: might this be graphic novels, contemporary fiction, non-fiction, poetry, comics or magazines?

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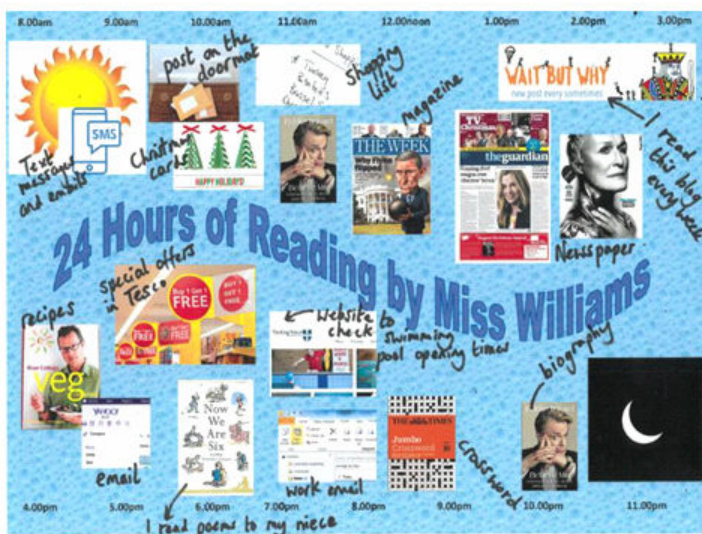
- Create your own library shelf: Bring books from home and add new ones you've read from the class library. This will enable you to discuss/recommend these texts.

If you want to get to know the children's preferences and practices as readers *beyond school*, then creating 24-Hour Reads, Reading Rivers or Graffiti Walls can be useful. In TaRs, the teachers, innovating on some KS3 work by Gabrielle Cliff Hodges, made their own Reading Rivers (collages of material read), and invited the children to make theirs too.

Analysing these for trends and individual interests helped teachers to widen their knowledge about individual readers. Using the 'Rivers' as the basis of reading conferences, many later sought to diversify the material available in school when they realised, for example, the popularity of comics, magazines and online reading.



Rebekah Denby, Teacher Library (OU RfP site)



Lizzie Williams, Headteacher, 24-Hour Read (OU RfP site)



Nico's Reading River Jon Biddle, (OU RfP site)

Reading for Pleasure pedagogy

A coherent Reading for Pleasure pedagogy was also developed by the TaRs project. This encompassed planned time for reading aloud, independent reading, and book talk, 'inside-text talk' and recommendations, all in the context of a social reading environment. Such practice is dependent upon teachers' knowledge of texts and their children as readers and was seen to be effective in motivating young readers and developing their autonomy and desire. However, it is not simply a case of employing these four strands of practice (now endorsed by the NUT 2016), much depends upon the extent to which these pedagogic practices are RIST, that is:

- Reader-led
- Informal
- Social and with
- Texts that tempt.

If as teachers we hold the reading reins too tightly and don't ensure that our reading for pleasure pedagogy is reader-led, reader-directed and reader-owned, we will never create communities of engaged readers. Honouring children's choice of texts is key, as is allowing them to exercise their rights as readers. The spaces and places that seek to foster engagement need to be child-owned, informal, sociable, without any sense of an attendant assessment or the imposed use of vocabulary books for instance! Children need the chance to build their stamina as readers, but will only do so and add to their reading volume if they *want* to read.

Developing children's desire to read is a subtle process—we cannot demand they find pleasure in any particular text, but we can entice and engage them as readers, and create relaxed invitational spaces for reading. We also need to be sure these are used. In a recent study of struggling boy readers, class reading areas were predominantly used for time out for bad behaviour or extra work; rarely for volitional reading (Hempel Jorgensen et al., 2018). 'Comfy' reading is what we as adults engage in at home, often on a sofa or in bed with a drink or a biscuit and in classrooms we need to offer far more than a few cushions in the book corner! To be really reader-led, we can give children options of who to sit with, where to sit, which text to read or share, whether to talk to friends about what they are reading and whether to hear others' recommendations (teachers and peers). We can offer occasional stories and hot chocolate time, torches and blankets and reading opportunities outdoors.

Many children don't choose to read at home, are not read to by parents (who may feel once their children can read there is no need to do so), and have negative attitudes towards reading. Worryingly, the PIRLS international survey reveals that in English speaking countries, England has the lowest ranking for enjoyment and the lowest for pupil engagement in reading, except Australia (McGrane, et al., 2017). So sustained time in school needs to be set aside for reading, alone and with others, for hearing narratives, poetry and non-fiction, and for book talk and recommendations through responsive use of this pedagogy.

for spinning webs of reader relationships. Such 'books in common' play a particularly resonant role in helping build communities of engaged readers.

Reading Teachers

In the TaRs project some, though not all teachers, developed as Reading Teachers—teachers who read and readers who teach, and who explore the classroom consequences of their insights into reading. The research team denoted these teachers with a capital R, capital T as they really opened up as readers in class and shared their personal affective responses with children. This enriched the development of reading



If you want to develop your reading for pleasure pedagogy, you could:

- Review your practice in one of the areas. Check out the four pedagogy audits at: <https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/theme/reading-for-pleasure-pedagogy>
- Consider the extent to which your practice is RIST and make changes in response.
- Ask your class their views and explore the innovations they suggest.
- Sustain any changes over time and document differences to children's dispositions and desire to read.

At all costs we must avoid routinising this pedagogy and ensure, for example, that the reading aloud choices are made by children as well as teachers. The books which we live through together for the sole purpose of shared enjoyment represent a rich resource for conversation, for connection and

communities. However, it isn't easy in the classroom to make the time to talk informally about texts, to engage in spontaneous 'inside text talk'—conversational talk that includes text referents and often involves quoting lines from known texts. Such natural talk is a key marker of community.

Nonetheless, if we want to nurture readers for life, it is essential we position ourselves as fellow readers and seize informal opportunities to engage in such significant 'book blether'. Initially, the children may assume we're going to ask questions to check their understanding of events or specific vocabulary, but if we're authentically engaged as readers, they quickly come to realise that we're genuinely interested in their personal thoughts, feelings and views. We can offer our own too, helping them recognise that conflicting views and diverse opinions are normal, healthy and interesting. Motivated and enthusiastic, Reading Teachers are thoughtful and interactive reading role models.

If you want to develop as a Reading Teacher, you might consider:

- Creating a suitcase of texts: Bringing in your 'old but gold' to add to the 'new and bold'
- Sharing your reading history on a PowerPoint and inviting the children to make theirs
- Inviting the children to draw you as a reader: what do they know?
- Discussing and exploring the rights of readers (Pennac, 2006)
- Exploring your reading habits: where, when, what do you like to read? Do you doodle, turn pages down, re-read sections, read the end first? Discussing your own and the children's habits will highlight uniqueness, difference and diversity.

Reading Communities

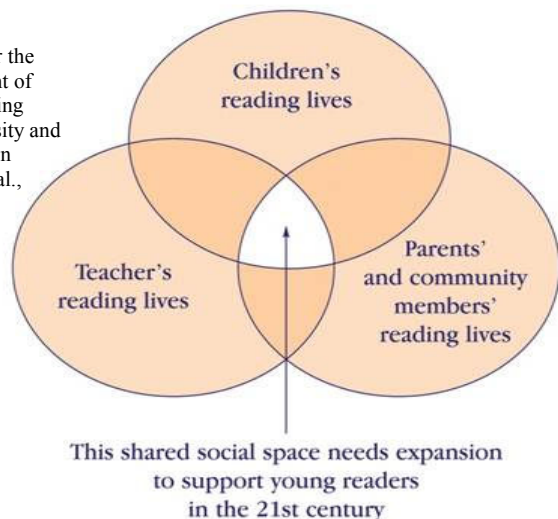
The social fabric of reading communities will be differently shaped in every classroom and school in response to the young readers, parents, teachers and teaching assistants involved. The TaRs research highlighted that communities of engaged readers are characterised by reciprocity and interaction, not by conformity. To create these communities, teachers need rich repertoires of children's texts and knowledge of their readers, a responsive pedagogy and an understanding of reading developed through adopting the personal stance of a Reading Teacher. Such communities are typified by the recognition and valuing of diverse reading preferences and habits, and a shift in the locus of control around reading for pleasure. Enjoyment will be placed at the centre of classroom practice.

This research reveals that children's pleasure in reading is strongly influenced by reading networks and relationships: between teachers; between teachers and children; between children and children; and in some cases, between children, teachers, families and communities. In schools where staff and senior leaders share their reading lives and blether about books and thus about life, a sense of connection and community will develop. It is important too that schools seek to include parents in their reading community, but building in-school communities first is advisable so parents are drawn in by their children's own engagement.

As a profession we must seek to learn more about parents' and families' reading practices; in this way, we can build more equivalent reading relationships with families and explore the potential synergies between teachers', children's and parents' reading lives and practices (see Figure 2). This shared social space deserves our professional attention.

Figure 2:

A model for the development of shared reading lives: diversity and collaboration (Cremin et al., 2014: 159)



In addition, we must make our conceptualisation of reading clearer; our often implicit understanding of reading as social, affective and relational needs to be revisited, discussed and profiled. We need to voice our professional views, based on years of experience and strengthened by research evidence, that reading for pleasure is a highly social process and that young readers are nurtured through their involvement in richly reciprocal communities of readers.

Reading for pleasure community website

In seeking to enable the profession to build communities of readers, the Open University has launched a practitioner website informed by the TaRs research and devoted to reading for pleasure. It is framed around the key findings (Figure 1) and has a range of resources to support teachers and schools, including: classroom film clips, PowerPoints for CPD, handouts of practical ideas, audits, videoed interviews, research bites, information on Book Awards, and monthly recommendations of Top Texts and Authors in the Spotlight. In order to help build local reading communities, the OU is working with 24 Higher Education institutions and SCITTs, and supports 82 OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Groups which offer free CPD for RfP across the UK. A monthly newsletter keeps teachers up to date with new resources, events and conferences and, in addition, the Egmont RfP Awards, in collaboration with OU and UKLA, help to profile the work of practitioners and schools who have created vibrant cultures of reading.

Significantly too, this community website invites teachers to share their own examples of research-informed practice and over 250 have risen to the challenge so far! Their inspiring examples, in line with the research, demonstrate that when practitioners read more widely, get to know the children as readers, develop their reading for pleasure pedagogy, and a Reading Teacher stance, they are empowered to build strong communities of engaged readers. Communities which have positive consequences for young readers. Why not join in and become a member of this reading for pleasure community?

You'd be most welcome!

For more ideas and examples of teacher practice in developing communities of engaged readers,

see: <https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure>



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